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ABSTRACT

If revision is as important as most teachers think it is and if students do not revise their work or cannct do it well, then teachers need to find ways to get students to revise involuntarily. Teachers could begin by emphasizing that revision is done primarily for the reader's benefit. That the revision stage of writing should rely heavily on adapting to and for one's audience is not new, but most studies supporting rhetorically-oriented revision still attend only to the microlevels of discourse, dealing almost exclusively with the word and the sentence. A shift from this position, getting writing teachers and their students to treat revision as transformation, would get students to think of drafts of compositions as bases on which to build by adding, deleting, and reordering--rhetorically-oriented revision at both the micro- and macro levels. The result of this attention to revision as transformation enables students to master the necessary skills of revision, to face writing tasks without fears, and to prevent writing from being a waste of time. (RL)

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Rhetorically-Oriented Revision: The Transformation of Prose

Richard Fulkerson

About two years ago, a research report in College English proclaimed in both title and text that "Rewriting Is a Waste of Time." Since the report challenged a basic article of faith, which I assumed I shared with many English teachers, I read with a more than usually critical eye. After concluding that both the writer's methodology and the findings were questionable, I promptly wrote a short rejoinder. But as is my common practice, I showed the three-page response to my wife. As usual I had forgotten that she is an astute and severe rhetorical critic herself. She read the note, handed it back and said, "you can't send that off. You're just being outraged and sarcastic."

I wasn't very pleased. After all, I had polished it several times and typed what I thought was a final copy. Disgusted, I argued with her for awhile, knowing I wouldn't win, then threw the manuscript on the desk. When I found it again a few days later, I realized that--as usual--she was right. I had been delighting in righteousness and wrath. As an expressive journal entry, my personal response was fine: vivid, detailed, and with an energetic personal voice. But as a rebuttal that I wanted seriously considered by readers, the paper wouldn't do.

Although my logos was sound (if I cut out a few clever ad hominem attacks), the ethos was not going to gain me credibility, and the pathos was overdone. I revised it extensively, hoping I was not wasting my time, and the rejoinder was eventually printed.

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At that time, I was honestly unaware of the irony inherent in rewriting four times a response to an article claiming that rewriting is a waste of time. For rewriting--fundamental substantive reconstruction of a draft, reconstruction at every level--is so much a part of my writing process that its value has become a fundamental tenet of my rhetorical faith.

Of course, on occasion I recognize the possibility that my own writing processes may be bizarre, but I take heart from the many professional writers who have testified that for them "writing is rewriting." As well as from the many times I have seen colleagues and graduate students take undistinguished drafts and turn them into effective prose through extensive revision. I assume that I need not belabor this point, that most of you also accept the importance of revision in some form or another.

But paradoxically, few students seem to do much rewriting. I know my students don't seem to rewrite significantly. And in her famous study of The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders, Janet Emig concluded that "Students do not voluntarily revise school-sponsored writing." I ask you to consult your own experience on this.

More important than the fact that students don't do much rewriting, is that what rewriting they do is frequently of the most trivial sort: editing to correct manuscript errors, and then recopying neatly. Emig said of the chief student in her case study, "Lynn's operational definition of rewriting seems to be the act of 'correcting' errors in the accidents of discourse--spelling, punctuation, titling, and the like. Such essences as organization of the whole and tone are, seemingly, left undisturbed." More recently, in the CEA Forum, James Scanlon has reported on an experiment in which a group of freshmen

in a college developmental writing course were directed to spend a second thirty minute period revising the essays they had just written on an NAEP topic. A few made significant changes, demonstrating that they may well have been improperly placed on the basis of a product-oriented writing test. But the more important conclusion for my purpose is that "most students concentrated on technical revisions in their second drafts,"--what Nancy Sommers calls "local revision."

It seems obvious to me that if revision is as important as I think it is, yet students don't do it, and don't do it well even when directed to, then we have to find ways to get them to revise involuntarily. I don't care for the coercive sound of that, but it occurs to me that much of what my students do is involuntary--beginning with taking my required composition courses.

In teaching students how to revise and then getting them to do it, I suggest we begin with the theoretical concept that revision is done, above all, for a reader's benefit. During revision the writer should consider alternatives to the natural choices made in drafting, and in considering these alternatives, the writer must continually ask, "What choice can I make that will achieve best the effect I want on the reader I am addressing?" And this, in brief, is what I mean by rhetorically-oriented revision.

That the revision stage should rely heavily on adapting to and for one's audience is not, I think, a particularly radical position. It would be accepted by theoreticians poles apart on many issues--Macrorie and McCrimmon, for example, both of whom in their different ways emphasize finally writing for the reader. When E. D Hirsch in The Philosophy of Composition talks of "relative readability" as the

key distinction between inferior and superior prose options, he is talking about revising for a reader. When Richard Lanham in Revising Prose discusses eliminating the "lard factor" from student writing, he is talking about making writing clear for the reader. And when Joseph Williams writing in the February 1979 College English criticizes the syntactic measures of stylistic maturity developed by Hunt and others, because "Those numbers . . . do not tell us whether a writer has written clearly something that his or her readers can understand easily," he too is talking about rhetorically-oriented revision.

If so many theorists have in fact already discussed rhetorically-oriented revision, why--you may well ask--am I up here talking about it today? The answer is that the studies I have just referred to treat rhetorically-oriented revision only at micro-levels of discourse: they deal almost exclusively with the word and the sentence, and on rare occasions with the paragraph. Certainly rhetorical revision of these micro-elements of discourse is important. But often our emphasis on the micro-elements, especially in textbooks, reinforces the notion that revision is limited to such matters and that micro-element revision is itself limited to technical and relatively minor matters--exactly what Emig's Lynne took it to be. Try this test: look up revision in the index to your current rhetoric. I predict that you will find relatively extensive material on revising diction and revising sentences, but little if anything on larger sorts of revision. And much of what you will find will not be presented in terms of adapting discourse for a reader but in terms of rules. The new edition of McCrimmon, for example, has ten pages on word choice and twelve pages on revising sentences, but only one on revising paragraphs. In a new text, Robins' The Writer's Practical Rhetoric,

we find a whole chapter on "polishing," and it deals with words and sentences without relating them to a reader's needs.

Let me suggest one possible reason for our tendency to limit revision to micro-levels of discourse. The three elements we have preserved from classical rhetoric (invention, arrangement, and style) are often superimposed on the tripartite structure of the writing process (prewriting, writing, and rewriting). Obviously invention and prewriting work well together. Arrangement and writing are a less comfortable liaison since we usually present arrangement as part of pre-writing; but with those two equations made, it then becomes easy to identify rewriting with style. The third stage of the process is equated to one level of the product. We seem to be saying that macro-level decisions about writing are to be made at either planning or drafting stages; once a text exists, only micro-decisions--and often the more trivial ones--are to be made.

In fact, the very metaphors we use also seem to suggest that revision is a relatively minor final touch, in which we "polish" our "rough" but already complete and perfectly-shaped gem of a draft, or in which we "refine" our impure text, or in which we treat the first draft as, "a marble block that the critical brain chisels into form," to use Donald Hall's metaphor from Writing Well. Now chiseling marble is a bit more elaborate than polishing or refining, but it still suggests that everything needed is already there and in the correct places. To shift the metaphor, all the writer has to do is "prune away the deadwood," or eliminate the lard.

Even Don Murray who has written most perceptively, in the Cooper and Odell volume, on needed research about revision takes a rather

limited view. He does talk of two principal forms of revision, internal and external. And his internal revision is certainly not limited to what I have been calling micro-elements. Murray defines it as including "everything writers do to discover and develop what they have to say, beginning with the reading of a completed first draft. . . . The audience is one person: the writer." It is only in that final comment that I part company with Murray on internal revision. If I am still writing to discover, still writing for myself, then I am not yet revising--although I certainly am re-envisioning.

Then external revision Murray says "is editing and proofreading and much more. Writers now pay attention to the conventions of form and language, mechanics, and style. They eye their audience and may choose to appeal to it. They read as an outsider, and it is significant that such terms as polish are used by professionals; . . the writer at this stage . . . may, appropriately, be concerned with exterior appearance." Although I applaud the emphasis on audience here, I deplore the reduction of audience-revision to polishing.

What I want is something added in between these two stages. Between rewriting as rediscovery for the writer and rewriting as polishing for the reader must come large-scale substantive revision aimed at the audience, as well as significant micro-revision, also oriented toward a reader.

Therefore, I suggest we try out a different metaphor, revision as transformation, transformation both in its ordinary public sense of turning one thing into another and in its linguistic sense. If we can get students to think of drafts not as rough-but-complete products to be polished, and not as impure compounds to be refined, but as bases to

be built on by addition, deletion, and reordering, then the students may be one step on the road to serious rhetorically-oriented revision at both micro and macro levels.

How then might we go about getting students to take this transformational view of their drafts?

Well, if the problem is that they don't voluntarily revise school-sponsored writing at all, then an initial step might be simply to compel revision. Since I suspect that students, like the rest of us, procrastinate until the deadline is near, I have sometimes deceived them by using the simple process of a phony due date. If an essay is due on, say, Friday, I pick up the papers, initial them to note that they were prepared on time, then hand them back and say, "Now rewrite these for a week from today. Turn them into what they should have been today, and submit both copies. If, in fact, you did everything you could to revise your paper, and there is no way you can think of to improve it, then turn it in by itself." A few of my students have sometimes revised their work thoroughly already. It wouldn't be fair or reasonable to demand another rewrite from them, and this stunt rewards their industry by giving them a week to relax. But even though this procedure does compel the student to go through a full writing and revision process, it often doesn't work, and it is enlightening in its very failure. Time and again I have received revisions that were either very little different from the earlier drafts, showing merely cosmetic changes, or worse than the originals. As Irmscher notes, in Teaching Expository Writing, our students don't know how to revise. Many of the changes students apparently think are improvements, aren't. Sometimes they cut important details as wordy. They shorten sentences to avoid what they

think are "run-ons." They replace clear, standard language with inflated and abstract and refined diction. They are certainly not conceiving of revision rhetorically as transformation for an audience.

That experience confirms my view that revision doesn't come naturally; it has to be taught. Yet Murray chides us, saying that revision is one of the "least taught" writing skills and that our students are "never introduced to the opportunities of serious revision."

To be taught revision, students have to be taught first how to see their writing from a reader's viewpoint. They must be able to see defects and options, and to see both from the alien position of a reader. Here I suggest, a small step may lie in using operatively the classical theory of modes of persuasion. A student might be able to judge his or her own paper more usefully if he or she learned to ask first, "Is the logic in this paper going to be sufficient to persuade a skeptical reader? If not, what can I add, delete, move, or otherwise modify in order to transform that logic?" Second, "Does the writer here sound like someone who ought to be listened to? If not, what can I add, delete, or modify to increase my ethos?" And third, "Is there enough emotional appeal to attract readers, hold their interest, and make them feel that whether they understand and accept the view matters? If not, what can I do to cause such a feeling?"

In an attempt to persuade students that such rhetorically oriented revision is important, I try to use ethical appeal myself. I take to class some of my own manuscripts, complete with multicolored revisions, whole pages deleted, other pages scissored apart and taped back together, and still others added to the typed draft in handwriting. In recommending such a practice to you, I am assuming of course, that all writing

teachers write themselves. I am not so enamored of the often recommended practice of writing an actual freshman assignment for this purpose. First students may (rightly) suspect that since this isn't real writing, the teachers modify their writing practices to show what they want to show. Second, the way a teacher treats a topic is a quantum jump from the way even a good student is likely to treat it. The difference is probably so great that the student may well be overwhelmed.

Since conceptualizing a reader is so cognitively difficult, especially for inexperienced writers, we can take several steps to provide them with actual reader response during revision. The teachers who use peer group editing have moved in this direction--although I hope they use the word "editing" in a broad sense. If peer groups are used merely to proofread manuscripts in order to remove stylistic errors before the teacher sees the text, they are serving only a minimally valuable purpose. They can be much more valuable if conceived in broader terms, as they are for example in Elbow's Writing Without Teachers. Having students share their "completed" work with the class is helpful in this regard too, but only if they use the class reactions as guidelines for a new transformation.

Or students can undertake teacher-directed revision. And I don't mean correcting the errors marked in a paper, although that is valuable for other ends. My own practice, in this regard, is to make specific suggestions about the structure and/or tone, and/or evidence and so forth in a paper and then to ask the student to rewrite the paper entirely, taking those suggestions into account. Since I find a major weakness in student prose to be a lack of detail (examples, or evidence, or facts), I often mark the pl_es in the paper where these seem needed and then ask that the material be added in revision. My standard

instruction in such a case is "make the paper twice as long without adding new ideas." When the paper is resubmitted, either I regrade it and count that grade, or on occasion I have the revision count as the next paper.

Teacher-directed revision can be used similarly when a student turns in as a journal or an essay, a piece of angry self-expressive prose about a recent event or a campus rule. In such a case, rhetorically-oriented revision is essential. Fury and outrage are not appropriate if the writer really wishes to accomplish something beyond therapeutic expression. In this regard it might well be helpful to discuss with the class or with the student involved, the adaptations of Paul Rogers' communication theories developed by Young, Becker, and Pike; or by Maxine Hairston.

Even more useful for directed revision is the approach taken in what I regard as a seminal article on revision, Linda Flower's "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," (College English, Sept. 1979). She distinguishes some structural traits of "writer-based prose" from those of "reader-based prose." Writer-based prose, she says, tends to have an egocentric, narrative structure reflecting the discovery process of the writer, and a survey form reflecting "the structure of the perceived information." Such structures are very helpful to the writer trying to gain control of the materials and trying not to omit essentials, but they are inefficient for readers who do not need to be led through the discovery processes themselves. Professor Flower concludes, "Everyone uses the strategies of Writer-Based prose; good writers go a step further to transform the writing these strategies produce." What I had done in revising the

rejoinder that my wife had dismissed as mere outrage and sarcasm was to transform the original writer-based structure to a clearer and more persuasive reader-based one.

Professor Flower deals primarily with macro-levels of discourse, but in "Defining Complexity" (College English, Feb. 1979), Joseph Williams had taken a similar approach to micro-revision arguing that sentences are easier to process when their grammatical structures are revised to reflect the "perceived semantic structure." I recommend both articles to you.

If through directed revisions, or phony due dates, I can finally get some good revisions from students, then I assume it is time to show the class the pairs of student writings produced, so that all can see that other students like themselves have in fact learned the skills of transforming a base paper.

There is a tremendous sense of power and pleasure in having created even a weak draft, if one knows enough about rhetoric and about audiences to make the conscious modifications that will transform the draft into a gem worth polishing--and maybe even mounting. Mastering the skills of rhetorically-oriented revision can thus take a good deal of the fear out of writing. And it prevents rewriting from being a waste of time.